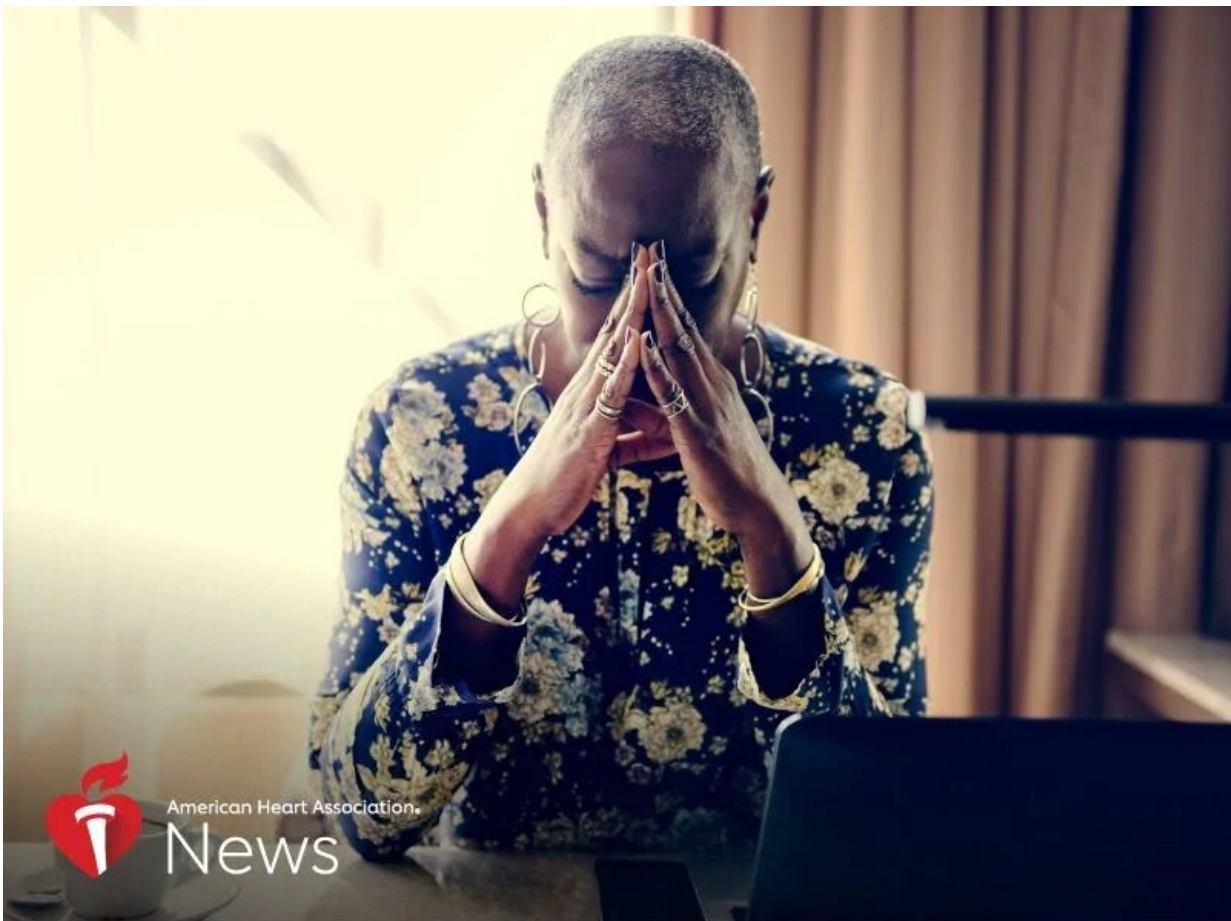


# Stress from work, home can harm women's hearts

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Even with supportive spouses, many women still find themselves helping

the kids with homework and cleaning up household messes, often while scrambling to make dinner after a 10-hour workday filled with deadlines and challenging colleagues.

All that stress could put [women](#) at higher risk than men for having a stroke or developing diabetes, [heart disease](#) and other chronic conditions, according to a growing number of studies.

If women expect to continue to take care of their loved ones, they must first take care of themselves, said Dr. Gina Lundberg, medical director of the Emory Women's Heart Center in Atlanta. She likens it to the safety instructions given to airplane passengers before each flight: In case of an emergency, parents should put the oxygen mask on themselves before they help their children with the masks.

"You have to take care of yourself. But with women, their little internal voice says, 'Oh, that's selfish. You should be doing for others.' And then you end up neglecting yourself," Lundberg said.

"Women need to make time for their general maintenance and health care. And we have to promote that it's not selfish to get your exercise, get your sleep, go to your doctor, get your mammogram, go get your [cardiac] stress tests."

Women who reported high levels of work-related stress were 38% more likely to have a cardiovascular event than coworkers with low levels of stress, according to one study.

In other research, [older women](#) who suffered from traumatic events, as well as chronic home- and work-related pressure, nearly doubled their risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Psychosocial stressors, even when associated with something positive – like getting a promotion at work – trigger a hormonal reaction in the body that has been linked to weight

gain and increased risk for heart disease.

Such stressors also are linked to behaviors that can lead to unhealthy lifestyle habits, said Dr. Sherita Hill Golden, a professor of medicine at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore.

"Many times, if individuals are too stressed, it's very easy to say, 'Well, I have so much to do that I don't have time to exercise.' Or maybe not eat as healthy as one should. I often joke that [ice cream](#) is much more soothing than an apple when you're in a period of stress," Golden said.

In addition to combating stress, sticking to healthy routines can have beneficial side effects, she said.

"When you set aside time for exercise and self-care and really taking time to eat a heart-healthy diet, you're training your children to do the same thing."

Golden also urged women to find a good primary care physician, someone other than a gynecologist, who they can rely on for regular monitoring of cholesterol levels and other cardiovascular disease risk factors.

Lundberg agreed, stressing that it's especially important for women who have a family history of heart disease to speak regularly with a physician they trust.

"There's so much we can do in prevention," she said.

Besides taking steps to control [blood pressure](#), cholesterol and to stop smoking, experts also recommend women engage in a hobby that can help relax them physically or mentally.

One way of doing that is to regularly "unplug" or find another way to get away from electronics, Lundberg suggests.

"Actually turn your phone off. Meditate, pray, do whatever you need to de-[stress](#). Drink more water and get a good night's sleep."

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